

Using the Case Clinic as a Brainstorming Session

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Context of the Case Clinic Process

Because the co-authors had earned the Ohio Inclusive Teaching Endorsement, they received a call for “Sensemaking for Student Success: A cohort-based faculty change method” funded by the Lumina Foundation and facilitated through the Howe Center for Writing Excellence at Miami University whose goal was to support faculty in developing and executing initiatives for student success. The co-authors represent different disciplines: Joseph Baumgartner (Biology), Alex Kemphaus (Math), and Ruth Benander, Rita Kumar and Brenda Refaei (English). Since this cross-disciplinary group was interested in creating a proposal for the Sensemaking program, we opted to use a Case Clinic format (Wenger-Traynor & Wenger-Traynor), so we could elicit everyone’s ideas to develop the proposal.

Brenda Refaei presented the Sensemaking program context. Our challenge was to identify a multidisciplinary, general education-oriented, student success problem to research. We needed to come up with a learning or equity problem to study and then develop innovative solutions. Typically, the Lumina Foundation funds four-year institutions, but this call was focused on supporting historically marginalized, first-generation students, which describes our student population. We needed to focus on a program or a disciplinary challenge, such as curricular coherence or programs that don’t seem to be supporting particular students. What we were most interested in was the cross disciplinary aspect of the program, so revising general education courses or programs would fit well. This group came together specifically to address this challenge collaboratively, but it was not a formal community of practice. We decided to use the Case Clinic format to try to structure our approach to this challenge.

Developing Understanding

Rita Kumar asked for clarification about the grant funding and who would select participants. Brenda Refaei responded that while the Lumina Foundation was funding the program, the Howe Center from Miami University would select participants.

Joseph Baumgartner asked about threshold concepts, wondering if they were like learning outcomes important for retention or matriculation. Brenda Refaei explained that threshold concepts are ideas that are essential to understanding a discipline, and once a student understands the threshold concepts, they think about the discipline in a new way. She clarified that learning outcomes are often derived from threshold concepts, even though they are separate ideas. In the case of the Sensemaking project, metrics like retention were not the focus since it was interested in the student experience.

Ruth Benander asked for clarification about how the program would support the team in developing and implementing their ideas. Brenda Refaei outlined how the Sensemaking project required a week with the project developers, becoming familiar with learning theory and threshold concepts. They would consult on the structure of the proposed study.

Sharing Related Experiences

Rita Kumar shared her experience with Radiologic Technology (Rad Tech) students taking her World Literature course. Eighteen of the twenty-five students were from the Rad Tech program. She wanted to make the required literature course interesting for these students. She decided a major literary analysis project needed more scaffolding because she couldn't assume what students already knew since they came from different disciplines. They may not necessarily have been exposed to the same levels of thinking about the literary analyses required in this course. She changed her approach to teaching literature to a more multidisciplinary approach. She said this experience made her pause to see what changes she needed to make sure she was not making assumptions about teaching literature that would disadvantage students from other disciplines.

Joseph Baumgartner shared his experience of how transparent assignment design changed his thinking about the assumptions he was making in the tasks he assigned. He commented that his assessments made assumptions about what students should already know. He said he was starting to see patterns in what he expected from students to hit the learning outcomes. He talked about how he could effectively communicate his expectations to his students and whether they have been met or not. He noted that trying to be transparent about his expectations has been a focus for him in the past few semesters.

Alex Kemphaus related his experiences with developmental math students of trying to make connections to different disciplines, so math was more relevant to his students who come from different backgrounds and interests. He commented that it was a challenge to make these connections, especially when students lacked fundamental math skills. He wanted to make these connections to help the students enjoy math, even just a little bit. He said it is always a challenge, and he hated the question, “When am I ever going to use this?” because it is hard for students to see the practical applications in basic math.

Ruth Benander contributed her experiences with studying student agency and belonging. She collaborated with a math colleague, giving weekly anonymous check-ins at the start of classes. Students who experienced these check-ins in both their math and English courses felt more connected to their peers and their instructors. Students said they were afraid to express their anxiety in class because they didn’t want to look dumb. However, because the surveys were anonymous and immediately debriefed, they said they liked seeing how their peers in the class were feeling. The students reported that it helped them feel less alone. Ruth Benander added when they interviewed students who had participated in these surveys, the students said they felt like their struggle was supported, and they understood how the skills from these classes were expected to be used in other classes. The students also said it was important to them that the instructors demonstrated that they cared about how students were doing.

Advice from Participants

Rita Kumar offered that what seemed to be emerging is students really appreciate a sense that somebody cares about them. She observed it is hard to find sufficient time to devote to community building in classes. Students want to be heard without feeling judged for their ideas. To validate the sense that they belong in college and have confidence to express themselves, we need to promote a growth mindset. Rita Kumar offered that while eportfolios could be a common space, all students must use Canvas (the university learning management system), so perhaps we could find a way to use Canvas as the common space. She indicated that there is a lot in current research on teaching about faculty burnout, so any solution needs to acknowledge that. We don't want to drain faculty.

Joseph Baumgartner observed that we need to create a common, accessible space where it doesn't matter if a student is a first-year student or a returning student. No matter what their background is, we could create a common space where everything the students need is centralized. He noted that this is where the idea of the eportfolio might be useful as creating that common space that centralizes academic work and student life.

Alex Kemphaus agreed that creating a common, accessible space would help students. He noted that it shouldn't matter what course a student is in, they all need support. The eportfolio could provide this.

Ruth Benander supported eportfolios because they are an electronic space that is easily shared. With minimal training, eportfolios are easy to implement. ePortfolio assessment is reasonably easy to set up because sites are easy to share, and the eportfolio reflection can appeal to students' specific needs across disciplines. She recommended the eportfolio's reflection as a way of both practicing and assessing student agency and progress in their programs. She noted that it is hard to share Canvas courses, even in the (2024) version of the Canvas eportfolio function. It is easier to share web-based sites.

Summary

Using the Case Clinic format to brainstorm our research focus was satisfyingly successful. The format allowed us to explore ideas in different ways, leading us to ideas we might not have thought of in a less structured way. This format allowed every person to fully participate, allowing extroverts to express themselves while allowing introverts to have the support to express themselves equally. Using this format allowed us to live our commitment to equity and inclusion, not just in the research idea we cultivated but also in our collegial relationships.

Brenda Refaei summarized that we need to help students feel like they belong in college and are able to achieve their goals. Currently, we try to make learning easier through scaffolding assignments, being transparent about expectations, and helping students see their options. We want to help students build a coherent experience in an accessible way that we can assess for effectiveness, which could be done through reflecting on their experiences. Even though students are in different disciplines, they have the common experience of navigating college. The action we hope to take is to create a common, accessible eportfolio experience, while also recognizing that faculty have time and bandwidth issues. We want to enact this eportfolio solution in a way that supports faculty in the implementation and supports students in the development of reflective thinking to create better self-efficacy and a sense that their college experience is a coherent journey to graduation and professional life.

References

Wenger-Trayner, E., Wenger-Trayner, B., Reid, P., & Bröderlein, C. (2023). *Communities of practice within and across organizations: A guidebook*. 2nd Edition. Sesimbra, Portugal: Social Learning Lab.